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October 1999: Like Belle, Librarians Do a Little of Everything

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the dean's corner

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Like Belle, librarians do a little of everything

Belle became J.P. Morgan's librarian when he lured her away from Princeton

"Small and slender, with dark hair and olive skin dramatically set off by light green eyes, Belle Greene had an extraordinary allure..." So begins a chapter in Jean Strouse's magnificent *Morgan: American Financier*, a compelling look at John Pierpont Morgan. Morgan may have been America's richest banker; doubtless, he was one of America's last great barons. Morgan was not only in the same league with Vanderbilt, Carnegie and Rockefeller, but also out of their league. Indeed, at one point he "bailed" out Carnegie during one of Andrew's more troubled times. He also warded off what would have become America's Great Depression before 1929. In 1907, Morgan averted market disaster and lost millions—tens of millions of his own dollars—in the process. Some think the market crash in 1929 would have passed had Morgan been alive.

But who is Belle Greene and what in the world could she possibly have to do with libraries? Greene was the daughter of Richard T. Greene, the man whom W. E. B. Du Bois dubbed one of "America's most gifted black intellectuals," and representative of Du Bois's "talented tenth."

Interestingly, both Belle and her father have separate entries in the *Dictionary of American Biography*, but under different names and with no cross-referencing.

Belle was "the soul of the Morgan Library"

Belle became Morgan's librarian when he lured her away from Princeton, where she worked for the princely sum of \$40 a month. For the royal sum of \$75 a month, Belle Greene became Morgan's rare book librarian. Belle loved rare books and had since her youngest days. She took over Morgan's acquisitions and it is to her indefatigability and

intelligence, that we owe Morgan's rather famous incunabula of Gutenberg Bibles and other such notables.

Belle was her own woman and kept her own counsel. "Just because I *am* a librarian," she is reported to have said, "doesn't mean I have to *dress* like one." Ouch! She wore couturier gowns and jewels to work. Ah, what a sense of style to note with arrident pleasure to our own laid-back (and sometimes laid-out) culture.

Belle became "the soul of the Morgan library." Her sense of humor and indomitable wit outsmarted so many who thought they knew more.

At one point she smuggled a number of rare items into this country for Morgan by letting examiners find less important things "with great seeming hesitation." On one such occasion, Belle let the examiners find several unimportant items while she remained, as she put it, "*very* indignant." The smug examiners

walked away with their catch never knowing they had fished in the wrong pond. Unknown to them were a painting, three bronzes, a special watch and other items she brought back to her boss, and the items for which the visit had been made in the first place. When Morgan saw her haul, Belle reported to a friend that “he & I did a *war* dance & laughed in great glee.”

When I read over these words not so long ago I thought of the number of times I have had to explain what I do for my life’s work. I haven’t smuggled anything, but I have been called upon to do any number of legal and ethical jobs not precisely encompassed by the word “librarian.” When asked what a librarian does, I have taken to the prosaic these days by copping what Chesterton said when asked why he wrote so much: “To aid the Divine gift of Language and Letters to outlive us all.” Okay, it’s a bit much and my interrogators walk away amused by my own visions of grandeur. So just what *do* librarians do?

It’s a fair question. On academic campuses, we fall between two chairs, between

faculty on one hand, and administrators on the other, at times becoming one, the other, or both, depending on the matters facing us at the moment. At one point we seem faculty; at another, administrators. And there are times that even we don’t really know ourselves which we are, as any review of the literature will reveal.

So what do we do? At times we librarians, to offer a short list, are managers, planners, system designers, leaders, supervisors, mediators, resource allocators, writers, researchers, scholars, speakers, fund-raisers, subject experts, budget analysts, grant writers, statisticians, consultants, computer troubleshooters, entrepreneurs and more. Oftentimes it’s hard to put a finger on what we do because different contexts require us to become different things. The point is, we often become what we have to become in order to get the job done.

My goal in coming to Winthrop is to enable—I believe “empower” is the buzz word these days—all Dacus library faculty and staff to be all of these things and then some. I

want this place called Dacus Library to be the most service-oriented place on campus. That doesn’t mean I think it isn’t now; it merely means I think we can improve. We’ll need your help, though. We’ll need you to help run quality control on what we do and how we do it. We want to hear from you. Are there more services we can provide? Are there things we are doing that you wished we didn’t? Is there a little correction we can make here or there that would enable you to do your jobs better?

I can’t really endorse smuggling, but you get the picture. We *want* to hear from you. We know we aren’t perfect, and being human, it isn’t likely we’ll ever get to what one would call close. But we know we can improve, and we suspect you must have some ideas about that. My e-mail address is herringm@winthrop.edu. Let us hear from you so we can begin that journey to perfection. Or, failing that, at least turn the corner on the right road.

Mark Y. Herring
Dean of Library Services

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